Factors to Consider When Selecting a Prevention Program

Program selection can be challenging. Not all programs are right for all communities. Programs that have appealing advertising, or that are well-liked in a neighboring town, may not produce equally good results in your school or community. So how do you figure out which program is right for you?

One important step in the selection process is to determine the *feasibility* of implementing a particular program—whether, for example, you can afford to deliver it, as prescribed, have adequate space or a school superintendent who will support your efforts. By assessing feasibility, you can get a good sense of how well a particular program will "fit" in your community. Failure to do so might not only compromise program success, but also jeopardize future prevention efforts.

Many factors go into assessing feasibility. These can be organized into six general categories, or dimensions:
- resources
- target population
- organizational climate
- community climate
- evaluability
- future sustainability.

Each of these factors is described in detail, below.

Resources
These are the factors most of us think of first, since they are concrete, quantifiable, and (usually) the most clearly defined (for example, most evidence-based programs have specific resource requirements). Resources generally fall into three groups:

- *Financial* (e.g., cost of training, cost of program materials, cost of space for program delivery)
- *Material* (e.g., incentives for program participants, access to program materials and training resources)
- *Support* (e.g., training for community members and key leaders, access to qualified staff)

Another key resource is time. For example, in schools where prevention programs compete with education reform initiatives, the amount of time a program takes to implement, and how easily it fits into the mix of existing projects, will be important to consider.

Target Population
This dimension assesses the degree to which the program(s) you are

considering address the characteristics and needs of the specific people you hope to reach. Factors falling into this category might include the following:

- cultural relevance (e.g., language, customs, norms)
- demographics (e.g., age, gender, socioeconomic status)
- willingness to accept a new program
- buy-in of key leaders
- favorable history (e.g., critical incidents, previous program success)

It is helpful to have representatives from your target population take part in assessing the feasibility of implementing a new program. If this isn't possible, make sure to collect input from people knowledgeable about the characteristics of the population.

Organizational Climate
The organizational environment into which you introduce a new project initiative will dramatically affect the success of that program. Before finalizing program selection, consider intra-agency and inter-agency dynamics. Try to include agency staff who will be affected by the new program in the feasibility assessment process. They will lend important perspectives and a more accurate reality check of the process as you attempt to gauge your organization's readiness to implement a new program. Factors included in this dimension might include:

- willingness to accept a new program
- fit with existing prevention efforts
- fit with existing non-prevention efforts (e.g., a school system's educational plan)
- buy-in of key leaders
- buy-in of staff
- favorable history (e.g., critical incidents, previous program success)

Community Climate
It's important to consider aspects of community climate that could enhance, or impede, program success. Will there be opposition? If so, why? What form might it take? Have you spent time considering how you might address any opposition? Before implementing the program, will it be necessary to spend time building stronger relationships with key community members who might otherwise undermine program success? Participants in some programs, such as mentoring programs, may need referrals to other services, such as counseling—are the requisite networks in place? Factors included in this dimension might include:

- willingness to accept a new program
- fit with existing prevention efforts
- buy-in of key leaders and community members
- favorable history (e.g., previous program success)

- permission (e.g., to collect data)
- access to a referral network for participants

Evaluability

This refers to your ability to evaluate a particular program model. Are the elements in place to conduct a good evaluation? Does your organization/community have the resources to do so? Factors included in this category might include:

- availability of baseline data
- access to participants over time
- simple program design
- access to appropriate evaluation skills
- financial resources available for evaluation

Many communities conduct evaluability assessments, designed to help you identify potential evaluation problems early on. As with all of the factors related to the dimensions of feasibility, discovering potential roadblocks early on will allow you to make changes to your own capacity or, if necessary, to the program model (and/or to the way it will be evaluated).

Future Sustainability

When selecting a program, you can only estimate the likelihood that it will be sustained at some point in the future—based on the presence of certain characteristics, such as ample resources for implementation, good fit with target audience, etc. Its' ultimate sustainability will depend on how well it succeeds. However, some factors, such as those listed below, can enhance a program's sustainability "potential":

- collaboration between the community and your organization
- community ownership
- renewable financial support
- continuous leadership
- positive image in the community
- strong host organization
- strong program advocate(s) or spokesperson(s)

Remember—it's never too early to start thinking about sustainability! If you wait until your initial grant period is almost over, you have probably waited too long. Whenever possible, sustainability issues should be addressed prior to program implementation.

Reference

Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover: Using Feasibility Assessment to Select Prevention Programs. (May, 2004). *CSAP's Northeast Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies.* Retrieved August, 2005. Available online at www.northeastcapt.org/selecting.